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Reading Bauman for Social Work

**Mark Smith
University of Edinburgh
School of Social and Political Studies
Chrystal Macmillan Building
15a George Square
Edinburgh
EH8 9LD
Scotland
mark.smith@ed.ac.uk**

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Abstract

This article seeks to locate social work within late capitalism, drawing on the social theories of Zygmunt Bauman to bring some analytical purchase to this discussion . It outlines key themes in Bauman's writing and considers discursive trends in social work practice against these. The starting point for Bauman's work is the shift he identifies from what he calls 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity. The implications for social work within solid and liquid modern imaginaries are considered. Essentially, modernity, in its dominant guises, conceives of social work as a technical-rational endeavour whereas Bauman would argue that it is an irredeemably moral one. The moral dimension, however, is swept aside by the bureaucracy of solid modernity and by the neoliberal precepts of liquid modernity. This creates a growing dissonance between the initial ethical impulse that brings people into social work and the job they are increasingly expected to do. Bauman argues that an ethical stance that involves social workers 'being-for' those they work with cannot come about through recourse to rules and codes but ultimately relies on workers taking personalised and situated moral positions.

Keywords

Bauman, modernity, postmodernity, liquid modernity, social work, bureaucracy,
social distance, neoliberalism, codes of practice

Introduction

Across what Lonne *et al* (2008) call the Anglophone world and Hugman (2009) the ‘global North’, questions at the heart of contemporary social work emerge out of the tension between personal commitment and managerial accountability, increasingly manifest through regulation. To regulate, according to Webb, is ‘to govern and control through a set of rule-bound actions or procedures’ (2006: 42). A regulatory impulse can feel threatened by but also more necessary within late modern societies, with their propensities to generate new forms of risk (Beck, 1992). Modernity seeks to impose order upon the resultant sense of insecurity through ever-more elaborate systems to assess, monitor and manage risk. While modernity seeks order, postmodernity is governed by the will to individual happiness and a relinquishing of the regulatory impulse (Bauman, 1997). A corollary of this, however, is anxiety, brought about by sacrificing modernity’s promise of security. The world is experienced as overwhelmingly uncertain, uncontrollable and frightening. (Bauman, 1997)

A central tension arises between what Webb (2006) identifies as these twin rationalities of regulation and security (2006: 5). Social work’s ambivalent positioning along this axis ‘is manifest through, on the one hand, its instrumental rationality, as complicity with calculating and regulatory practices, and on the other hand, its substantive rationality in securing personal identity through its dialogic and expressive face-work’ (Webb, 2006: 6). Within the neoliberal political and economic regimes, which predominate across most of the Anglophone world and encroach more widely, regulatory systems have become entrenched to a point where, through a

process of governmentality (Rose and Miller, 1992), they assume a taken for granted status in the minds of practitioners. But, while generally internalising this perceived need for regulation practitioners know, nevertheless, that there is something rotten at the heart of much current day social work; the technicist, rule-bound and administrative grind of daily practice rarely accords with what most of them came into the job to do (Jones, 2001). This can lead to what Bourdieu *et al* (1999) identify as ‘social suffering’ where the gulf between the reality of social workers’ occupations and their more deeply held ontological and professional beliefs becomes a source of acute personal discomfort.

This dissonance between managerial accountability and personal engagement is increasingly identified in the literature (e.g. Jones, 2001, Meagher and Parton, 2004, Ruch, 2005, Webb, 2006, Smith and Smith, 2008, Halvorsen, 2009). This article draws on Zygmunt Bauman’s social theory to provide some analytical purchase on this dissonance. Bauman’s work is beginning to appear on the radar of social work writers uneasy with and eager to find alternative ways of conceptualising the state of the profession (e.g. Abrahamson, 2004, Hugman, 2003a, 2003b, Webb, 2006) and more generally within the literature on child welfare (Moss and Petrie, 2002, Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Bauman (2000) has himself spoken and written on social work.

Bauman, by his own account, is not a bystander, a dispassionate observer of the human condition but one who is engaged and invariably positioned on the side of the poor and the dispossessed. True to form he identifies less a dissonance and more a fundamental philosophical disjunction between regulation and personal commitment,

arguing that ‘when we obscure the essential human and moral aspects of care behind ever more rules and regulations we make ‘the daily practice of social work ever more distant from its original ethical impulse’ (2000: 9). ‘When concepts, standards and rules enter the stage’, he argues, ‘moral impulse makes an exit’ (1993: 61). By this reckoning the plethora of rules and regulations that increasingly surround practice are not just minor but necessary irritants; they act to dull the moral impulse to care and to ‘be for’ those we work with. This is a claim that calls into question the entire thrust of social work as currently constituted in the UK and across much of the Anglophone world, where claims of progress and service improvement and of confident, competent workforces are hitched to the wagon of an expanding regulatory apparatus.

In the course of this article I draw on Bauman’s work to interpret discursive shifts in the positioning of the profession over time and some of the implications of this. I consider the shift Bauman identifies from what he calls ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ modernity, identifying features of how social work is positioned within each. Specifically, I address his critique of bureaucracy and its corollaries of social distance and ambivalence before moving on to a discussion of his ethics. Bauman’s approach to ethics can perhaps only be understood in its connection to the themes that emerge from the wider corpus of his work. His is an ethics that has little place for the rule-bound and codified approaches that are the bedrock of much current social work. Instead, they require that ethics be repersonalised and contextualised within the inevitable complexities of everyday practice.

Bauman's Life and Work

A Polish Jew, Bauman began his career as a sociologist in Warsaw. From 1971 until 1990 he held a chair of sociology at The University of Leeds where he remains professor emeritus. He started out as a committed Marxist who, over time, came to eschew the universalising tendencies of communism as having little to offer an increasingly complex world. Beyond this it is hard to categorise Bauman's work. He is prolific and broad ranging, a theorist **rather than empiricist**, an exponent of the sociological imagination par excellence. His move away from Marxism involved a postmodern turn in which he railed against the rationalizing tendencies and universal ethics of the Enlightenment or at least what became the dominant strands of the Enlightenment project (Bauman, 1993).

His location within an oeuvre of the sociological imagination immediately sets Bauman at odds with the dominant political direction of social work, which casts the profession within increasingly technical-rational paradigms. Indeed, Jones (1996) identifies the deliberate intellectual purging of the social work curriculum in the UK by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work Education (CCETSW) over the course of the 1990s. Sociologists were particularly unwelcome within a reductionist, competency-based framework. Bauman brings sociological perspectives to bear on the profession with some force, providing compelling insights into the social world in which social workers ply their trade. The starting point for any consideration of Bauman's work is an exposition of modernity.

Modernity and its discontents

Modernity (or at least its dominant guises) imposes a divide between reason and emotion. (Submerged although resurgent strands of Enlightenment thought and especially perhaps those centred around David Hume and other figures in the Scottish Enlightenment knew better and eschewed such a stark divide - see Tronto, 1993).

Dominant Enlightenment values, however, became based around this rational/emotional dualism, foregrounding qualities of positivism, rationalism, objectivism, universalism and a desire for order. Postmodernity, by contrast sets aside erstwhile certainties valorising constructivism, interpretivism, subjectivism and pluralism (Hugman, 2003a). The influence of postmodernism on social work is by now fairly well established if not always swallowed whole (Hugman, 2003a).

Bauman himself took a postmodern turn as is apparent in the title of his book 'Postmodern Ethics' (1993). He later distanced himself from the term postmodernity, however, preferring his own concept of liquid modernity. This postulates that we remain in a broadly modern epoch but one that is distinguished from the 'solid' modernity of the post-war welfare consensus with its belief in human progress through rational scientific advance by an increased pace of change and fluidity. It is according to Blackshaw (2005) solid modernity coming to terms with its impossibility. Bauman does, however, hang on to a core tenet of postmodernity in his incredulity to grand narratives Lyotard (1984); he recognises the contingent and ambivalent nature of the world.

Bauman's work came to wide public prominence in 'Modernity and the Holocaust' (1989) in which he argued that modernity's quest to impose order and to eradicate

ambivalence culminated in the Holocaust and, although less explicitly articulated, in the gulags. The Holocaust was not an aberration, a blip in modernity's path of inexorable progress, but a defining and perhaps inevitable feature of its totalising instincts. He developed some of these arguments in 'Postmodern Ethics' (1993) and still further in 'Life in Fragments' (1995). He then turned his attention to an analysis of some of the major social features of modernity. Foremost among these is globalisation addressed in a book of the same name (Bauman, 1998). Globalisation is characterised by movement; global travel and communication technologies have changed the meaning of distance. But, as the strapline of this book suggests, globalisation has human consequences. Rather than bringing societies closer together it actually polarises them, creating categories of tourists and vagabonds. Tourists move around because they want to; vagabonds, the homeless, the refugees and immigrants, because they have to. Movement is their only commonality; otherwise they occupy different spaces. Indeed tourists' persistent fear of slipping into vagabondage (Abrahamson, 2004) leads them to take steps to maintain a social and cultural distance between the two categories.

Similar polarising dynamics emerge in 'Work, Consumerism and the New Poor' (1998) and in 'Community' (2001). The consumerism, of liquid modernity denigrates the welfare state, the child of solid modernity, for fostering dependency. In place of dependency consumer society valorises choice. The production line of solid modernity is replaced by the temple of conspicuous consumption and choice, the shopping mall; the work ethic is replaced by an aesthetic of consumption (Bauman, 1998). In reality and despite the rhetoric of capitalism, however, not everyone can be a consumer. The poor are still with us but the poverty of the new poor is not

understood as a consequence of structural forces as in the period of welfare consensus. Rather it is indicative of their failure to take up the choices available to them in the marketplace; they are 'flawed consumers'.

Freedom within liquid modernity depends on a capacity to consume. But this capacity is tenuous; the spectre of poverty is its alter-ego, as global recession evidences only too starkly. In a consumer society the poor have little use any more; they are not required as producers and not up to the mark as consumers. Without the discipline of the work ethic the vagabonds and the new poor threaten the anxious existence of tourists and consumers. The threat they pose, or are imagined to pose, is cast into the realms of criminality through a proliferation of new laws and increasingly punitive criminal justice regimes (Bauman, 2004). Political rhetoric claims to want to include them but they are to be included only so long as they buy into the narrowing moral centre ground of consumer society (Levitas, 1998, Butler and Drakeford, 2001) and of course few can do so. 'Inclusion', thus, becomes a mode of social control.

Criminalising the poor identifies them as the authors of their own misfortune; offending places them beyond the pale of decent society. Bauman (1993, 1998) calls this process adiaphorisation; 'linking poverty to criminality helps to banish the poor from the realms of ordinary moral obligation' (1998:77). Adiaphorisation neuters our moral responsibility, removing certain classified groups, the poor, the asylum seeker, the paedophile, the anti-social youth or neighbour from the sphere of moral concern. It masks the comfortable but anxious majority's disengagement from a commitment and responsibility to those who do not conduct themselves 'as we do' (Blackshaw, 2005). Generally, liquid modern society is characterised by fragmentation,

discontinuity and inconsequentiality (Bauman, 1994). That is the terrain on which social work operates and needs to come to terms with. In that respect hearkening back to a time when the profession seemed to be in a better place is unrealistic. It needs to adjust to the new order, but not to accept it. But first, perhaps, it needs to understand where it is in time, beginning with its genesis in the modern period.

Social work in modernity

While social work's origins lie in religious traditions of care for the poor and the outcasts, modernity co-opted it to its consuming and unifying logic of human progress through the advance of science and reason:

'Born within the period of modernity...., social work began to take on the omniscient voice of science... with its emphasis on reductionist, logical positivist rationality, (It) took on this dominant discourse in the pursuit of status and professionalism. To this end we have seen codified systems of ethics, the move towards greater standardisation and competencies development, ... systems of accreditation (and) a proliferation of managerial and market discourses in welfare... (Sewpaul, 2005:211).

Social welfare in the modern project can claim some massive achievements, foremost of which being the creation of the welfare state with its aim to destroy the five giants of want, disease, squalor, ignorance and idleness. Social work picked up and ran with some of these noble aspirations as epitomised in the UK in the hopes and ideals of foundational policy documents such as the Kilbrandon (1964) and Seebohm (1968) reports.

These hopes, however, were short-lived. As a child of modernity social work inherited its progenitor's struggle to deal with ambivalence and its rational/emotional dualism. It came down on the side of the rational; social workers were not to be 'diverted by their personal beliefs and convictions or by emotions - sympathy or antipathy - to fellow workers or to individual clients' . Actions 'should not be oriented to persons at all, but to the rules, which specify procedure (Bauman, 1994: 5). Such an orientation inevitably narrows the horizons of social work, for:

'When procedural execution takes over from moral assessment as the guide to job performance, one of the most conspicuous and seminal consequences is the urge to make the rules more precise and less ambiguous than they are, to taper the range of possible interpretations' (Bauman, 2000).

Thus, social work quickly became a narrow, municipal, bureaucratic activity obsessed with classification, categorising, assessing and labelling, seeking legitimacy for the use of such terms through claims to 'evidence', 'best practice', and increasingly to codified rules of practice and behaviour. More than anything, the task became de-personalised. In Bauman's terms this has the effect of effacing the face of social work clients, making them into a category and stripping them of their uniqueness and alterity. They are responded to as objects of intervention rather than as unique and moral persons to whom we are responsible out of an ontological call to care rather than by virtue of our professional duty. Duty-bound professionalism limits the help or care we offer by imposing (administrative and 'professional') intermediaries to that process. Rationality and moral purpose can point in opposing directions.

Social Work in Liquid Modernity

The 1980s and 90s witnessed a retreat from welfare as neoliberal political and economic regimes spread across the developed world. Neoliberalism challenges ideas of the collective as embraced by the principles of the welfare state, valorising instead the primacy of the autonomous individual. This is framed within discourses of human rights and choice (Harvey, 2005). We have seen since the 1980s ‘a slow yet relentless dismantling or weakening of agencies which used to institutionalize *commonality* of fate and their replacement with institutions promoting the diversity of fate’ (Bauman 1994: 20). In the UK the New Labour government elected in 1997 heralded in and provides an exemplar of Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity. The commonality of fate envisaged within welfare regimes was replaced by warmly persuasive but inherently individualising notion of ‘personalisation’ (Ferguson, 2007).

Modernisation, another warmly persuasive word, became the watchword for the public services. This has involved a spirit of relentless change ‘indeed obsessive and compulsive change (variously called ‘modernising’, ‘progress’, ‘improvement’, ‘development’, ‘updating’) (which) is the hard core of the modern way of being’ (Blackshaw, 2005:39). Social workers will be only too familiar with this spirit of obsessive, compulsive change.

Social work in liquid modernity has been ruthlessly brought to heel, located in government thinking firmly as its agent within the consumer society. *Changing Lives*, the previous Scottish Executive’s review of social work states as much: ‘As demanding consumers of goods and services, users of social work services will

increasingly expect the same variety, choice and flexibility that they expect from the business sector'. (Scottish Executive, 2006:20). Any erstwhile dalliance with notions of social change were dispelled by Sam Galbraith the former Scottish Executive minister when he stated that, 'Social work services are not about redressing the major injustices in our world. Their remit is not to battle with the major forces of social exclusion. It is to promote social inclusion for each individual within their circumstances' (Community Care, 22 May 2000).

The political positioning of social work within a rubric of global capitalism is again betrayed in *Changing Lives* in references to social workers helping 'towards developing the economy, helping people to become self-reliant once more' (p17). The Review also notes that political priorities will continue to be driven by fear of crime and anti-social behaviour ' (p. 21). The role of the social worker, by implication, is to buffer the comfortable but anxious majority from the excesses of the new poor.

Liquid modern society positions social workers in other ways too. Like clients, they too are consumers; social work is no longer the vocation it might have been thought to be in solid modernity. A banal example of how the liquid modern mind can conceive of social work is provided in a recent advert for social workers in Scotland under the banner "socialclimber'. It featured a young, trendily-dressed woman who, despite her youthful appearance, seems to have had half a dozen social work jobs within as many years; including a lecturer post during which time she managed to write a couple of books! A serial social worker no less, reflecting liquid modernity's sense of emptiness and impermanence. This of course has implications for the type of social work clients

can expect. As Bauman notes, The 'flexible' labour market neither offers nor permits commitment and dedication' (1998:35).

While differing in feel and emphasis, both solid and liquid imaginaries share, nevertheless, a recourse to bureaucracy to carry through their respective projects. The consequences of a bureaucratic mindset occupy the centre ground in Bauman's thinking.

Bureaucracy

New Right political and economic thinking, which emerged over the 1980s and 90s, reinforced an obsession with order, effected through managerial approaches to practice and governance. Managerialism is a technical-rational doctrine concerned more with due process and outcome measurement rather than with any wider moral purpose. While the purported aim of managerial approaches to welfare was to free up services from a perceived dead-hand of bureaucracy, the neoliberal project is in fact shot-through with contradictions (Harvey, 2005). The state of perpetual revolution that neoliberalism envisages, where all that was solid melts to dust, induces a sense of insecurity. The response to this is obsessive measures of surveillance and information gathering. For all its talk of modernising public services New Labour has simultaneously presided over a massive increase in regulatory regimes (Humphrey, 2003). In UK social work these are based around the various Care Councils, each with powers to formulate standards and inspect services against these and to register and discipline the social care workforce (McLaughlin, 2007). The workplace cultures that emerge from such regulatory impulses entrench bureaucratic ways of working and constrain individual initiative.

The mechanisms for the maintenance of managerialist agendas in liquid modern societies are insidious though; they depend on the one hand upon command and control edicts, but operating alongside this repressive aspect is another of seduction. Managerialism appeals to a common-sense view of the world, professing a 'globalising and imperialistic logic that proclaims itself as the universally applicable solution to the problems of efficiency, incompetence and chaos in the old ways of providing public services' (Clarke, 1998: 174). And in many respects social work has been seduced into believing that solutions to complex social and moral questions can be reduced to bureaucratic fiat and regulatory apparatus.

Bauman offers some telling insights into the role of bureaucracy in organisations and in wider cultures. He implicates modernity's obsession with order and tidiness in the Holocaust (1989) arguing that the branch of the SS with the very ordinary title of Section of Administration and Economy 'though engaged in mass murder on a gigantic scale, ... showed concern for correct bureaucratic procedure, for the niceties of precise definition, for the minutiae of bureaucratic regulation and the compliance with the law (1989:14). He goes on to say that the Holocaust epitomises principles of rationality - the final solution represents the 'rational pursuit of efficient optimal goal-implementation. It arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose' (1989: 17). The general accomplishment of the rationalising tendency Bauman argues, 'has been solidified and institutionalized ... in modern bureaucracy' (1989:29). In social work, the faith placed in the possibility of some universal, standardized, rational end point to be arrived at through honing the bureaucratic machine is perhaps apparent in its pursuit of concepts such as 'best practice', 'what works' and 'standards' and increasing attempts to apply such

standards globally (Sewpaul, 2005). These end points, however, can only be arrived at by weeding-out other possibilities, denying context-specific realities, prioritizing a quest for bureaucratic efficiency over other considerations and sweeping aside the messy bits that are part and parcel of human encounters.

Now it would be taking things too far to assert a moral equivalence between current-day managerialism and the extermination of the Jews. This required a virulent, anti-semitism. But anti-semitism alone could not bring about the resultant atrocities; its pathological ideology required the bureaucratic apparatus of the Nazi state to bring its project to a conclusion. But while modern day managerialism may not presage another Holocaust, parallels of smaller scale might be drawn. The combination of zealous but erroneous ideology and a belief that these might be advanced through bureaucratic fiat has been responsible for some of the less savoury episodes in social work's recent past, such as the satanic ritual abuse (SRA) scares in the early 1990s. Proponents of SRA operated from positions of certainty and solidity whereas the realities of practice in arenas such as child protection are inevitably messy, ambiguous and contingent. Attempts to address ambivalence through control and mastery are both destined to fail and risk degenerating 'into inhuman cruelty and oppression' (Bauman, 1994: 36). Indeed, managerial approaches to child protection more generally are increasingly recognized as doing more harm than good, shattering families and communities (Lonne et al, 2008).

Social distance

Atrocities in Nazi Germany were made possible through the imposition of a social distance between the Party functionaries and those Nazism sought to weed out from its vision of society, the Jews, homosexuals and trades unionists. One of Bauman's most chilling observations is that the SS guards were not psychopaths but normal men and women going about their jobs to the best of their abilities. They were distanced from the objects of their work through the division of labour and extended chains of command, which acted to create distance and dissipate responsibility.

A readiness to fulfil one's duty, following procedures regardless of the content of the work one is told to perform is a prerequisite of a functioning bureaucracy. The bureaucratic mindset has a particular resonance in social work where extended line management arrangements are commonplace and responsibilities diffuse.

'In a large organisation most members do not even see (or hear of) the ultimate, remote and always oblique results which they help to materialise. So they may go on feeling moral and decent persons..., even while helping to commit the most gruesome cruelties' (Bauman, 1994: 7).

While perhaps reflecting Bauman's capacity for exaggeration and flowery language the dynamic described here undoubtedly exists in, for instance, the decisions taken at headquarters level to deny a family with a severely disabled child the respite package they need. This decision is passed down from senior to front-line social worker who passes this on to the family as a *fait accompli*. The rules have been applied, the deed

done. And when done often and routinely enough it becomes a procedural duty shorn of emotional or moral sentiment. The most prominent emotion to be exiled in such cases is 'that resilient and unruly 'voice of conscience' that may prompt one to help the sufferer and to abstain from causing suffering' (Bauman, 1994: 6).

A consequence of social distance is lack of moral responsibility. 'Responsibility is silenced once proximity is eroded... the fellow human subject is transformed into an 'other' by technical bureaucracy' (Bauman, 1989:184). Webb (2006) identifies the Pindown regime in English children's homes where children were subject to oppressive restrictions on their freedom of movement as an example of what can happen when there is a lack of proximity in relationships and carers begin to think that caring can be reduced to a set of house rules to manage behaviours. The Pindown regime did not come about because its proponents were bad or uncaring people; it came about because they began to believe and were encouraged to believe that expert systems could take the place of personal relationships and personal responsibility in caring for children.

Where does this leave social work?

Most people still come into social work driven by a desire to do good (Cree and Davis, 2007). They are ground down by bureaucracy, managerialism and ever more intrusive attempts to impose technologies of categorisation, surveillance and control and by the depersonalization of the social work role. The consequences of this are manifest in a haemorrhaging of staff from the profession. Yet the seductive capacities of managerialism often prevent managers and practitioners from recognizing the root

cause of the problem and they seek solutions in more of the same; the rules aren't working so what we need are more and better rules seems to be the refrain. The root problem is more fundamental. There are irreconcilable conceptual difficulties inherent in attempting to offer a caring and emancipatory social work within the conditions of modernity. Bauman argues that neither bureaucracy nor business, (reflecting solid and liquid modernity respectively) can deal with the moral concerns that are part and parcel of 'being for' the other. 'Bureaucracy strangles or criminalises moral impulses, while business merely pushes them aside.' (1994:13). Ethics in both are reduced to rules of conduct - in bureaucracy these are procedural, in business they are contractual. The consequence of this is that

'Rather than being emancipatory, the welfare services today constitute a second rate and repressive regime which have recourse to the expert and 'governmentalised' gaze of those employed by the state, the DSS officer, the community development worker, the GP, the social worker, the probation officer and so forth, who collectively 'police' the 'flawed consumers' (Blackshaw, 2005:127).

A return to ethics

While a reading of Bauman might lead to fairly pessimistic conclusions being drawn about the state of contemporary social work he also offers pointers to what is required to make things different. It is a tall order, demanding that dominant discourses are made to stutter. In essence social work needs to be reconceptualised as a moral rather than an instrumental task. Any emergent moral purpose needs to be rooted in the

person of the social worker rather than in abstract ethical or behavioural codes. In drawing us towards this conclusion, however, Bauman is not alone. A number of social work writers are beginning to identify the profession's underpinning moral foundations. Webb, for instance, claims that:

'the legitimacy of social work rests on exhortations that betray an ethical intent rather than a set of empirical or outcome based possibilities...the return to ethics should be a major theme that characterises social work in the late modern scenario.' (2006:8)

Bauman is also going with the grain of moral philosophy where there is a general turning away from any hope of finding and applying abstract and universally applicable moral rules as posited by dominant Kantian perspectives and reified in rule-bound policy and practice cultures. Dissatisfaction with Kantian ethics is evident in the growing interest shown in other ethical approaches, such as feminist ethics of care (e.g. Tronto, 1993) and the resurgence of Aristotelian virtue ethics (Banks and Gallagher, 2009). Within such moral frameworks individuals have to reach moral decisions with both feet firmly in the real world of practice situations and relationships.

Bauman's own ethical writing is based on that of Emmanuel Levinas, perhaps France's foremost philosopher of the 20th Century. Levinas turns modernity's ethical tenets on their head. Descartes argued *cogito ergo sum*, 'I think therefore I am', providing an early assertion of the Enlightenment's rootedness in rationality. Kant formulated his categorical imperative, introducing a calculating, contractual element

to our relationships with others - I am to do unto others and care for others out of duty and because one day I myself will need to be cared for and would hope to get back the same respect as I have demonstrated. For Levinas, ethics is neither rational nor calculating; he places ethics at the core of philosophy, identifying the moral impulse to reach out to the other as primary. We are to 'be for' the other.

Levinas introduces the notion of 'the face', signifying not just the physical features but the entire being of the individual who confronts us and draws us to them. The face demands that we connect with it in a very immediate way, face to face, without intermediary. Our responsibility for that person is infinite and immediate. This contrasts with social work as it has developed where 'the way in which power is imagined and exercised in late or liquid modernity is to the exclusion of any human contact at all' (in Ferguson, 2004: 213). Face to face encounters/intimate relationships are mediated through an expanding array of policies, procedures, assumptions and, increasingly, technology. We call it professionalism and professional distance.

Modernity's dominant mode of relating to the 'other' is to make them like 'self', thus threatening their alterity with a totalitarianism of the same. Alterity for Levinas goes beyond difference. It encapsulates the absolute unknowability of the 'other'. Although we are pulled to the 'other' we can never really know them; there remains a transcendence to our relationships. The way we seek to know them is to draw them into a normative frame, as exemplified in social work's attempts to assess, categorise, and label. Ethically, this 'murders' their alterity. Levinas eschews any notion of reciprocity; care looks for nothing in return. A further departure from Kant comes in Levinas' conception of freedom. In Kantian thinking the ultimate measure of human

existence is the autonomous, free-thinking, individual. For Levinas, freedom only comes in relationship with others, in heteronomy (community) rather than autonomy.

Bauman's moral writing is based upon this general Levinasian account. His use of ethics and morality can appear contradictory at times but generally he contrasts the two. Ethics is an attempt to codify morality, or to set forth norms; morality is an orientation to the 'other'. 'Reality is messy and ambiguous, so moral decisions, unlike abstract moral principles are aporetic, that is irredeemably ambivalent and contingent (Bauman, 1993). A moral stance is personal but 'it must also embrace the moral dimension of the public, social objectives that are pursued and choices that are made' (Bauman, 1993: cited in Hugman, 2003a: 1035). This acknowledgement of the public and social dimensions involved in taking a moral stance perhaps resonates with emerging interest in Habermasian discourse ethics in social work (Houston, 2003, Lovat and Gray, 2008). It is in such spaces that the potentially idiosyncratic nature of purely personalized moral decisions might be reconciled with the public role of social workers.

Bauman's ethical thinking revolves around his identification of humans as 'ineluctably - *existentially* - moral beings' (1995: 1). Dominant political and indeed professional perspectives on ethics, reified in approaches to governance based around rules and regulations, reflect an essentially misanthropic view of human nature. Essentially we need to have our baser instincts kept in check by layers of legal injunction and behavioural codes; we need rules to be moral. Bauman turns that on its head (1993) arguing that we are not moral thanks to society. Rather, society exists because individuals are moral; they have the capacity to take decisions and to act in

ways that are oriented to the 'other'. To be moral is not necessarily to be either good or bad 'but to exercise one's freedom of authorship and/or actorship as a choice between good and evil' (1994: 1). As moral beings we need to be aware of 'the moral character of our choices: of our facing our choices more consciously and seeing their moral contents more clearly' (1995: 7). The plethora of rules we are increasingly confronted with actually inhibit moral thought and action, encouraging us merely to abide by the rules. In that sense:

Codified rules of what to do in particular cases and cases of like kind, gets us off the hook of moral endeavour...Adherence to codified rules does not necessarily require self-awareness or accountability for taking a moral stance. It simply requires learning the rules and following them...

(Ricks and Bellefeuille, 2003:121)

Bauman (1993) notes that people are capable of making moral choices and do so in small and large ways on a daily basis. Many social workers still make caring connections with and go the extra mile for those they work with although very often they do so in spite of rather than because of the organizational structures and assumptions that frame their work.

Conclusion

Bauman's work has relevance to social work in perhaps two main ways. Firstly it offers a lens through which to understand the 'social' at a time when atomizing agendas of individual rights and choice dominate. The 'social' landscape Bauman

pains demands that we cannot ignore issues of poverty, inequality and perhaps most of all exclusion. Secondly Bauman highlights a fundamental paradox in the way the profession is currently conceptualized and governed. What is undertaken under the banners of professionalisation, modernising, improvement, regulation or whatever zeitgeist term is employed will, by their nature, fail to deliver. Worse still, such initiatives compound the very difficulties they purport to address by treating social work as a technical-rational undertaking that is amenable to the usual rules of bureaucracy or business. Such rules and principles are in fact inimical to a conception of social work as a moral endeavour.

What a truly 'liquid' social work might look like is perhaps the task for a further paper. However, we can offer some pointers. If social work is, ultimately, conceived of as a moral endeavour then attempts to render it rational cannot but fail for, 'Morality is endemically and irredeemably non-rational - in the sense of not being calculable, hence not being presentable as following impersonal rules' (Bauman, 1993:60). Morality then can't be defined in codes of conduct or sets of abstract rules. Merely following rules or procedures gets us off the hook of proper moral endeavour. Morality needs to be grounded and demonstrated within relationships and through moral comportment within these. This calls for reflexive practitioners prepared to listen to that unruly voice of conscience and to break the rules when those rules do not facilitate a 'being for' those they work with. There is no rule-book that tells us how to go about this. 'For the ethical world... ambivalence and uncertainty are its daily bread and cannot be stamped out without destroying the moral substance of responsibility...' (Bauman 2000: 10).

There are all too apparent challenges in practicing ‘liquid’ social work within political and agency cultures that, in their response to insecurity, become ever more solid. Being morally active carries risks to reputation and ultimately job security within foreclosing practice cultures. However, in order to retain or reclaim any ontological purpose social work and social workers need to become open to different possibilities, to the articulation of diverse and contrary discourses, to give up on the quest for some elusive ‘best practice’ and to become comfortable with uncertainty; in short to become reflexive and morally active practitioners. Perhaps, now, more than ever social work requires such morally active practitioners prepared to step into uncertainty and to challenge the ruling ideas that have not served social work well.

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